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CAUCASIAN FLAT WOVEN DRAGON CARPETS "VERNI" and "ZILI

In the old days, dragons on these carpets moved with their feet,
being in museums and galleries, they were forced to move on their heads

Introduction

Almost all of the flat-woven Caucasian dragon carpets "Verni" and "Zili", which are in museum and private collections, date from the late 19th - early 20th centuries. The vast majority of these carpets come from the Caucasian Karabakh. However, there are also rare specimens woven in Shirvan, Nakhchivan and Dagestan. There are Iranian and Anatolian replicas, well, we must admit, there are also the notorious Transylvanian "Tuduc"s (Theodor Tuduc).

The dragon motif in Verni and Zili carpets has its origin in the famous pile carpets of the Safavid era. The iconographic analysis of numerous modifications of the images of the dragons of the Safavid carpets and the Caucasian flat-woven Verni and Zili of the late 19th and early 20th centuries made it possible to draw confident conclusions about the genetic relationship of this motif in both groups of carpets. The iconographic continuity of this motive is beyond doubt.

The roots of the symbolism of the "dragon" motif go back to the ancient, pre-Islamic talismanic function of protecting against evil, bestowing good luck, strength, power and prosperity. The presence of the image of a dragon in the carpet magically protected the living space of the owner of the carpet. This explains the "vitality" of this ancient symbol in carpets over the centuries. In large palace carpets, the images of the dragon, in addition to the protective one, performed the function of representing the strength, greatness and authority of the ruler. In folk and tribal carpets, dragons performed the talismanic and decorative function of decorating the interior of the dwelling.

Figurative images of dragons in Safavid carpets

In the early Safavid carpets (16th century), the images of dragons are mainly performed in a figurative, realistic style and are easily recognizable. Their images are found

in the so-called "paradise carpets" of Tabriz and Ardabil, the density of knots of which reaches 70-80 knots per dm2. Dragons on these carpets are often paired with the mythical bird Simurgh. At the same time, none of these carpets contain an image of a dragon flying or standing upside down (feet up, head down). The iconographic analysis of the Safavid "garden" and "hunting" carpets (they were the forerunners of the "dragon" carpets) made it possible to reveal an interesting pattern in the depiction of animals: an animal upside down (ungulate or predator) is a sign of a defeated (killed) animal. In accordance with this regularity, the dragon on the carpets could not be depicted upside down.

Plants, animals and birds of the central field/medallion of Safavid carpets were depicted from a general point of view, approximately coinciding with the optical center of the carpet. The point of view from the center of the carpet to its rectangular space is inevitably limited to the top and bottom and side edges of the carpet. Thus, the “top” and “bottom” of the carpet were actualized by the upper and lower edges of the carpet.

Safavid pictoral carpets with dragons did not have vertical or horizontal symmetry, but they did have a distinctly perceived “top” and “bottom” of the carpet. The dragon, in the spatial coordinate system of the carpet, remained an easily recognizable character in the plot. When trying to portray him upside down, he became poorly (difficult) recognizable and this was contrary to tradition. The tradition of the correct (top-bottom) placement of the dragon in the carpet indicates that Safavid carpets were intended for palace walls and were hung in the same way as European tapestries.

Thus, already at the very beginning of the Safavid era, the figure of the dragon, which had “top” and “bottom”, was placed in the carpet proceeding from a single and static point of view on the carpet field, limited by the upper and lower borders. At the same time, the "top" of the dragon's figure was identified with the horned head, and the "bottom" - with the scaly, clawed legs and tail. All this suggests that already in the early Safavid carpets, the tradition of depicting a dragon was established, in accordance with the characteristics of human perception of the "top" and "bottom" of any space.

The pictoral character of the early Safavid carpets with figuratively depicted dragons indicates that the artist, when creating the motif, was guided by the method of simple mirroring (realistic method) of the seen or virtual plot. The carpet artist created a “picture of vision” of the plot in accordance with the peculiarities of human vision and the perception of characters in a space that has “up” and “down”.

Ornamental "dragon" carpets of the era of Shah Abbas

At the beginning of the 17th century, the Safavid Shah Abbas the Great was personally involved in the reform of carpet production in his empire. Since that time, preference is

given not to complex and unique pictoral carpets, but to ornamental carpets that were easier to duplicate and replicate. Ornamentalization of motifs presupposed their certain “standardization” by the method of stylization and geometrization of motifs repeated in design rapports. This is the design concept of the famous Safavid "dragon" carpets of the 17th century.

The process of design restyling on the example of "dragon" carpets is most clearly seen in the Karabakh carpets of the Safavid era. Karabakh was a province of the Safavid Empire recaptured by Shah Abbas from the Ottomans in 1606.

The Karabakh carpet traditions were characterized by the use of South Azerbaijan (Tabriz, Ardabil, Heris) carpet traditions in their design, with a preference for plant and flower motifs. At the same time, the Karabakh carpets also had Caucasian features, in which geometric stylizations of plant and zoomorphic motifs prevailed. This local (Karabakh) synthesis of figurative and ornamental-geometrized style had a decisive influence on the emergence of the iconography of the dragon motif, well known to us, in the Safavid carpets of the 17th century. The dragon motif in these carpets is the result of a synthesis of Tabriz pictoral and Caucasian geometrizing tendencies in carpet design.

The technology of flat-woven weaving also had a strong influence on the dynamics of the Karabakh stylization and geometrization of the motif. Average knot density of Karabakh carpets “Verni” and “Zili” corresponds to 35-55 knots per dm2. The weaving technique by complex winding of a woolen decor-forming thread around the warp threads did not allow creating complex and curvilinear figurative images of dragons. The only possible solution was the extreme simplification, schematization and geometric stylization of the pictoral of the Safavid dragon, which we can see in the late Karabakh carpets “Verni” and “Zili”.

It should be noted that a simplified and schematized image of a dragon has long been present in the local Caucasian carpets of Shirvan, Kuba, Kazakh and Karabakh, in the form of small “S” -shaped curls that filled the voids of the central field. In local carpets, these small hook-shaped (S) dragon symbols served as talismans against the evil eye. The hooked dragon shape (S) was supposed to "gouge out envious eyes" that could harm.

Local weavers, who have long been familiar with the symbolism of this motif, have never made a fundamental distinction between the top and bottom of these small "hooked" dragons. The lack of detailing in them was dictated by their small size and did not matter much, since the very fact of their talismanic presence in the carpet was important. The location of these small "hook" (S) dragon motifs relative to the spatial coordinates was arbitrary, since the S-shaped dragon curls had no "top" or "bottom".

In the late XIX - early XX century, the motif of the Safavid dragon, having got into the flat-woven carpets “Verni” and “Xili”, underwent a thorough reinterpretation. The motif of the old figurative dragon turned into a large “S” -shaped schematic motif, in which the dragon was almost impossible to guess. Extremely enlarged “S” -shaped motives have

replaced the old, easily recognizable pictoral dragons. The addition of two parallel, thin, wavy lines (horns) and two short, leg-like elements made this motif more “recognizable” and dragon-like. However, these important additions helped define the “top” and “bottom” of the dragon.

The importance of these additions (horns and feet) to the schematized motives is evidenced by the old technical drawings, which were used to woven "Verni" and "Zili". These drawings are in the album of carpet samples published by the Handicraft Committee (1. Fig. No. 804). In the Album, the dragon carpet “Zili” is placed with the dragon's wavy horns on top and two short legs on the bottom. The same position of the dragon is repeated in the album of technical drawings of Azerbaijani carpets, published by Kerimov L. in 1961 (2 Table 8, Fig. 3).

The new dragon motif is no longer the same symmetrical figure that can equally well be positioned in any vertical direction. A dragon is already a figure that has a “top” and “bottom” and placing it upside down is the same as hanging a portrait carpet upside down. Those who are not familiar with this carpet do not attach much importance to this because of the invisibility of the dragon's horns and legs. Some, however, completely misinterpret these details and believe that the dragon's legs are its horns, and vice versa.

The erroneous (inverted) hanging of the dragon "Verni" and "Zili" in many museums, galleries and the publication of their photographs in Catalogs and Albums, unfortunately, turned into a common "disease" and there are several reasons for this disease:

1. Misinterpretation of the upper and lower parts of the dragon figures;
2. Hanging carpets based on museum precedents. If other museums or galleries have hung like this, then this is correct;
3. The more common, deliberate hanging of carpets with the appearance of inverted dragons is justified by the fact that the carpet was woven in this direction and, therefore, the beginning of weaving is the bottom of the carpet, and the end is the top of the carpet. In this case, the appearance of the inverted dragons does not matter.
4. Carpets "Verni" with dragons are hung upside down due to the fact that with such a hanging small figures of gazelles, goats and birds in the voids between the figures of dragons look right (not upside down). And therefore - this is the "correct" hanging of the carpet.

The first two reasons are understandable, although not excusable. These museums/galleries still have a chance to make sense of the carpet dragons and the display features of these flat-woven dragon carpets.

Supporters of the third reason are those who, carried away by the carpet, did not notice how they went over the extreme. Going over the edge is also a crime. They forgot that a carpet becomes a carpet only after it leaves the loom and begins to live in a society

where there are traditions and patterns of perception of the world. And the society perceives the carpet not as a self-demonstration of weaving technology. The society perceives the carpet as a complete artistic product, ready to use and admire. And for sure, society is not very interested in the technology of this carpet, which can be interesting only to a narrow circle of specialists. The Museum of Art is not a corporate museum of technology, but a museum that displays objects that have become works of art just because they carry the spiritual and artistic potential available to everyone.

Among western collectors of Oriental carpets, in the last century, a certain standard for the demonstration of carpets was established, according to which the exposition of carpets must correspond to their position on the loom at the time of their weaving. This highly controversial opinion creates and will continue to generate many problems. Today, a huge number of symmetrical and asymmetrical carpets have already been recorded, which were woven in reverse order. That is, the start and end of weaving does not necessarily coincide with the “bottom” and “top” of the carpet design. This erroneous principle of Western experts is simply inapplicable to carpets that have clear and unambiguously perceived "top" and "bottom" designs.

It is well known that some designs are more convenient and faster for the weaver to weave in the reverse order. Such precedents were more common in ornamental, symmetrical carpets, but even in this case, “leaving” the loom and entering the society, the carpet automatically regained its true “top” and “bottom” based on design, not weaving technology.

It should be admitted that the technical aspect of the direction of weaving has never mattered either to the carpet consumer or to the museum visitor. Perhaps this is of narrowly corporate interest. And if we are to be honest to the end, then we must admit that the look of an inverted carpet with dragons standing on its head cannot be liked even by the same carpet technologist. Then the question arises: For whom were the dragon carpets turned upside down?

And finally, for the last reason why dragon carpets are shown in the position of inverted

dragons: Firstly, do not forget that the main motif of the carpet is a huge S-shaped dragon, but not small and barely distinguishable images of mountain goats, gazelles or birds, placed in the voids of the main motive.

Above we have already said that it was sometimes easier and faster for a weaver to weave the carpet in the opposite direction. This often happened when the carpet, along with ornamental motifs, also contained figurative images of animals and birds, the direction of which was opposite to the direction of the ornamental motives. In this case, it was easier for the weaver to weave the carpet in the opposite direction. In the opposite direction, it is easier to weave an ornament than a figurative image of an animal.

In the case of confirmed reverse weaving, we are faced with a local technical problem. This purely technical problem ended at the moment of separation of the carpet from the loom and was never recalled by anyone else. From that moment on, dragons and the carpet itself became part of the artistic and common space and obeyed the laws of the concepts "top" and "bottom".

The main typological motive of our carpet is a dragon and its visual recognition cannot be sacrificed to minor motives that have the status of “fillers” of the carpet voids. And of course, one should not forget that this carpet is classified as "Dragon"s.

Conclusion

The design of the Caucasian flat-woven carpets "Verni" and "Zili" is ingeniously simple: the entire field of the carpet, formed of two vertically stitched halves, is filled with huge S-shaped schematized dragon motifs and these dragons are not indifferent to their position relative to the "top" and "bottom" Carpet.

Perhaps for some it does not matter. But in relation to cultural memory and tradition, the upside down dragon is an act of museum vandalism. This act is tantamount to hanging a portrait of your ancestor upside down. The mythical dragon in Azerbaijani carpets is the same ancestor, but not biological, but cultural, protecting and bringing good luck.

One can understand European experts in oriental carpets and curators of exhibitions. The symbol of the Eastern Dragon is not their cultural heritage. In European cultural memory, the dragon is Evil, Antichrist! And such an assessment of the dragon phenomenon sometimes subconsciously interferes with being more sensitive and insightful to this intriguing magical person of Eastern cultural memory.

But one cannot understand such indifference of the Azerbaijan Carpet Museum, its curators and "experts" who, like bad students, obediently repeat the mistake of European experts on this issue. Disappointment and bewilderment are caused by the position of the museum, which considers the demonstration of the technical sequence of carpet weaving more important than an adequate demonstration of the carpet with the normal appearance of dragons.

It can be assumed which theater of absurdity begins from the moment when the museum guide begins to talk about the dragons of this carpet. After a long search for the notorious dragons and the guide's answer about the reason for the reverse hanging of the carpet and the forced turning of the dragons upside down, museum visitors can only guess about the reasons for the "perversity" of the author of the carpet, who loved to weave dragons upside down.

Sooner or later, these carpets, of course, will be shown correctly, and they will be laid on horizontal podiums. Perhaps it will happen with the next generation of museum workers, more literate, more sensitive to their cultural memory and better than European dealers and collectors who know their carpets. But for several generations these carpets will remain in their memory as carpets with dragons turned upside down ... and this is very sad.

Of course, in fairness, I must say that the world museum practice has many examples of an adequate demonstration of the Caucasian dragon carpets "Verni". And they, "without further ado," left the question of the direction of the weaving process for the private reasoning of technologists.

Today, no matter what arguments are made in defense of the inverted display of carpets, one thing is clear: - at the heart of this fact is the technical problem of demonstrating these carpets. Once in the museum exposition, they have changed from floor-standing to wall-mounted. The vertical hanging of these carpets in museums "automatically" inspired the appearance of a virtual "top" and "bottom" in them.

The opposite direction of the motifs of dragons and small figures of animals and birds aggravated the problem, forcing museum workers to choose: either a dragon, which has an almost invisible difference between "top" and "bottom", or - small figures of animals and birds, whose top and bottom are easily recognizable. This dilemma was ultimately resolved in favor of small, albeit minor, but on the other hand, figures with an easily distinguishable "top" and "bottom".

This choice of museum workers forced the dragons living in these carpets to turn upside down.

It is sad and ashamed for the vandalism in front of the humiliated dragons ...

Sources:

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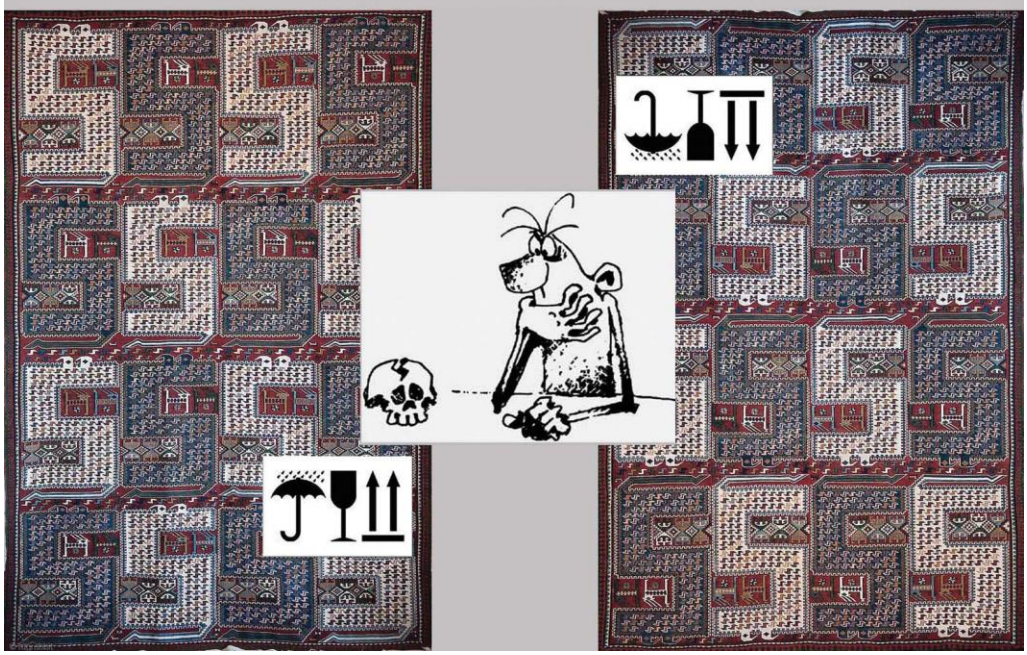
ILLUSTRATIONS

CAUCASIAN FLAT WOVEN DRAGON CARPETS "VERNI"...

and how now, to determine where it is «TOP» and where is «BOTTOM» ... ???



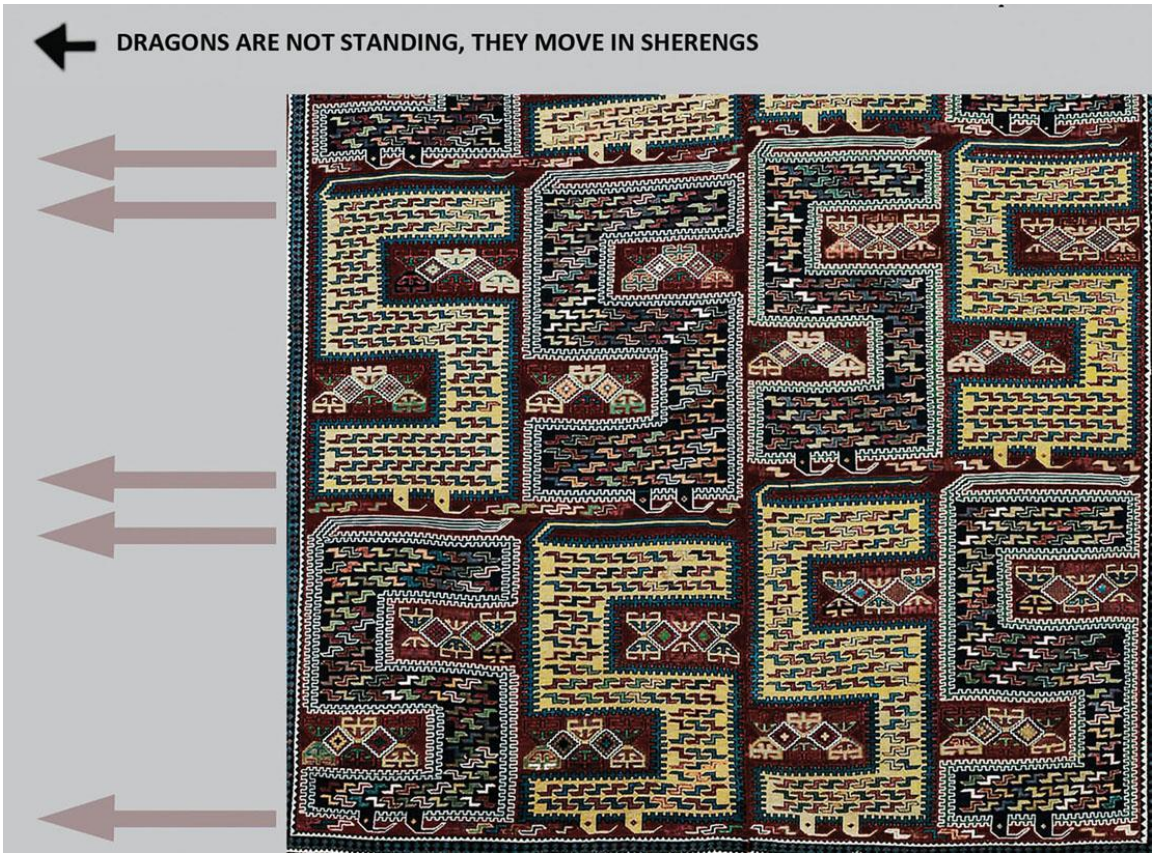
SAFAVID, FIGURATIVE TYPE OF DRAGON DEPICTION.
XVI CENTURY

Typology of the stylized (geometrized) Safavid dragon. XVII century

Typology of the stylized (geometrized) Safavid dragon. XVII century

SAFAVID ANCESTORS OF DRAGONS
200 YEARS PASSED ...

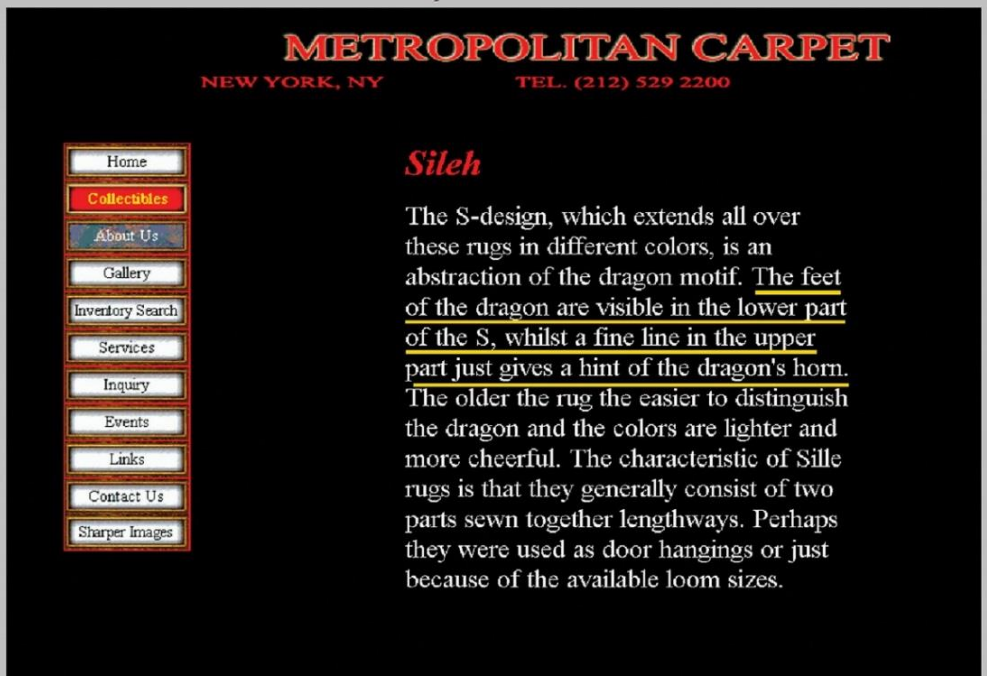
THE DRAGON HAS LEGS. A DRAGON WITHOUT FEET IS A SNAKE.
NUMBER OF FEET CAUCASIAN VERNI DRAGONS 2 – 4
FEET OF ANATOLIAN DRAGON.
XV CENTURY


DRAGONS ARE NOT STANDING, THEY MOVE IN SHERENGS

SAFAVID DRAGONS HAVE A SMALL TREE / BRUSH GROWING ON THE CHEST, BRANCHES - UP
SAFAVID
VERNI
IN DRAGONS WHICH HEADS DOWN - THESE BRANCHES FORCED TO GROW - DOWN
IN THE CARPETS, WOVEN IN THE WORKSHOP, ACCORDING TO THE TECHNICAL DRAWINGS, THE PICTURE OF A TREE / BUSH IS PRESENT.
IN THE CARPETS WOVEN BY ANALOGUE OR BY MEMORY - TREE / BRUSH IS EITHER ABSENT OR WOVEN ON THE CONTRARY

FOR THOSE WHO DIDN'T KNOW WHERE IS "BOTTOM" AND WHERE "TOP" OF THE DRAGON ...

http://www.metropolitancarpet.com/Sileh.htm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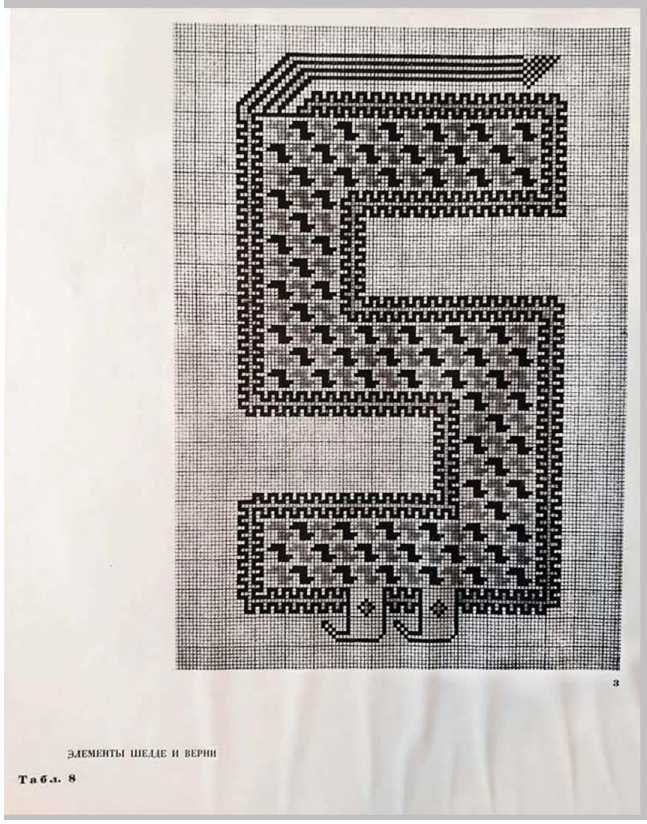
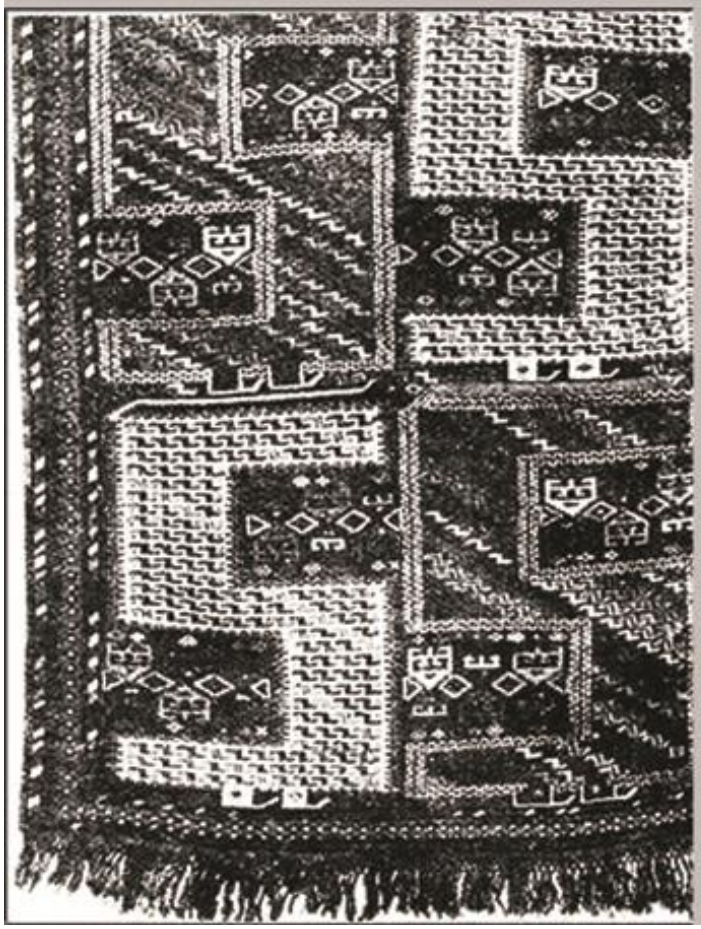
Sileh
The S-design, which extends all over these rugs in different colors, is an abstraction of the dragon motif. The feet of the dragon are visible in the lower part of the S, whilst a fine line in the upper part just gives a hint of the dragon's horn. The older the rug the easier to distinguish the dragon and the colors are lighter and more cheerful. The characteristic of Sille rugs is that they generally consist of two parts sewn together lengthways. Perhaps they were used as door hangings or just because of the available loom sizes.

TECHNICAL DRAWING OF THE DRAGON AND ITS CORRECT LOCATION ON THE CARPET.
ALBUM OF TECHNICAL DRAWINGS L. KERIMOV
("AZERBAIJANI CARPET" VOL. I BAKU-LENINGRAD 1961)



Page of the book "Photos of carpets, metal and other handicrafts collected by Yu.K. Straume".
Saint Petersburg 1911.



Page of the book Piralov A.S.
"A short sketch of the handicrafts of the Caucasus",
Saint Petersburg 1913

In both books, Verni/Zili carpets are placed according to the dragons

Taher Sabahi Gallery.
Torino

Azerbaijan
Carpet Museum